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The Lyric Self: Artifice and Authenticity in Recent American Poetry

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The late 1950s is arguably one of the great watershed periods in American poetry. The publication of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl & Other Poems* (1956), Theodore Roethke's *Words for the Wind* (1958), W.D. Snodgrass's *Heart's Needle* (1959), Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959), and Anne Sexton's *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960) dislodged the dominance of mid-century formalism. Besides the loosening of form, what became central to a poet's reputation at the brink of the 1960s was the author's candor in recounting his or her most private experience and emotions within the poem. By the mid-1960s, a new generation of poets had succeeded in throwing off the academic restraint of post-war American poetics that had been dominated by the influence of Auden and the New Critics. Not only had these younger poets broken through the barriers of form, often writing without the net of regular rhyme and meter, they had also broken other taboos by confiding in their poems the most personal or salacious episodes from their private lives—their breakdowns, affairs, alcoholism, and other sordid stuff.

Lowell's *Life Studies*—arguably the most influential collection of its time—as well as the work of so-called "post-confessional" poets of the 1980s and '90s depends upon poetic conventions that date back to the English Romantics, especially Coleridge and Wordsworth. In *Life Studies* Lowell premiered a flattened, more colloquial, Williamsesque line, permitting only a residual presence of the meter and rhyme for which he had been justly acclaimed. But Lowell's breakthrough work in *Life Studies* owes a debt as much to the English Romantics as it does to W.C. Williams or the Beats.

By the late 1970s and early '80s, the mode of writing introduced by Confessional poetry had become so dominant within the poetic mainstream that its rhetorical strategies became almost paradigmatic. Critics began to employ terms such as "sincerity" and "artifice" to describe the contrasting personal and impersonal modes for writing poems: the former underscoring the "naturalness" of voice and the candid reportage of private personal experience; the latter underscoring the prominence or visibility of craft, including traditional elements of prosody, in the poem. In 1980, poet/critic Jonathan Holden described contemporary poets' favoring "naturalness" of voice over "craft," writing that the principle problem had become "how much conspicuous artfulness a poem should display."[1] Holden argued that: "The more personal a poem is—the more a poem purports to be about the self of the author—the more the question of how sincere the poem sounds will be a factor in our judgment of it. And the greater the requirement for sincerity is, the more questionable will be the role of craft."[2] Of course, as the '80s dawned, despite the emergence of Language Poetry and also the rise of New Formalism, the autobiographical lyric that combined emotionally charged imagery and plain-style personal statement had become *de rigueur* in mainstream American poetry—and came to represent for dissenting poet/critics like Charles Bernstein a hegemonic "official verse culture."[3] Since the 1990s, autobiographic personal poetry, as the dominant mode of the poetic mainstream, has become a much-contested site. The mainstream, as I refer to it, has been represented since the late '70s largely by free-verse poets, most associated with MFA programs—as opposed to poets associated with Language writing or other "experimentalist" schools in the postmodern avant-garde.

The major poems by a significant number of these poets offer the reader a dramatically enhanced version of the author's private experience, usually in the form of a domestic lyric or lyric narrative, and find closure with a psychological epiphany. The speaker in these poems is a figure I call *the lyric self*, a voice positioned to speak as the poet's—an authorial speaker. The lyric self may not be identical to the author's actual self in real life, but is a facsimile, altered to some degree by the imaginative necessities of the poem. It is my contention that the lyric self's emergence pre-dates Lowell and his confessional heirs, making its earliest and most influential appearance in English-language poetry in the Conversation Poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge written at the end of the 18th century.

The lyric self is in fact a Romantic construction whose viability depends upon conventions that encourage the reader's belief in the poem as a representation of the author's *authentic* lived experience or emotion outside the poem. Such conventions require that the reader trust in, even insist upon, the authorial speaker/protagonist's sincerity, suggesting that the poem's success arises more from the text's emotional candidness or level of personal disclosure than its mastery of language and craft. Thus, the poet's "voice" in such poetry must convey to the reader the imprimatur of the author's personality or temperament in the world outside the poem. The critic Jed Rasula in *The American Poetry Wax Museum* citing John Koethe, argues that this sort of writing encourages a "poetics of the 'individual voice' that valorizes authenticity and fidelity to its origins in prepoetic experience or emotion."[4] Thus, it makes perfect sense for Jonathan Holden to argue that the greater the poem's requirement for sincerity, the greater the need that the poem's craft be invisible.

Despite its purported fidelity to authentic experience, the poem nonetheless remains a literary artifact—a text—and as such can at best only be a simulacrum, the measure of whose sincerity or authenticity must be determined by the reader. Stephen Dunn claims that: "Sincerity is something other than what one 'honestly' asserts, and it is arrived at with the help of a mask."[5] Dunn further claims that for its sincerity to be convincing, a poem relies upon the successful deployment of artifice which the poet, like a successful con artist, uses to convince the reader. Dunn writes: "I want to feel a deep sincerity of purpose, the artifice almost invisible."[6] It is my purpose in these pages to make the artifice visible, to examine rhetorical strategies that poems in the autobiographic mode frequently utilize to persuade readers of their authenticity. A number of such poems, which I call *the modern Conversation poem*, depend upon the same rhetorical strategy Coleridge devised for his discursive, blank-verse Conversation poems written between 1794 and 1798.

The Conversation Poem

Critics apply the term *Conversation poem* to nine of Coleridge's poems, seven of which he grouped together under the heading "Meditative Poems in Blank Verse" in his 1817 collection *Sibylline Leaves*. The three examples best known by modern readers are "The Eolian Harp," "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison,"

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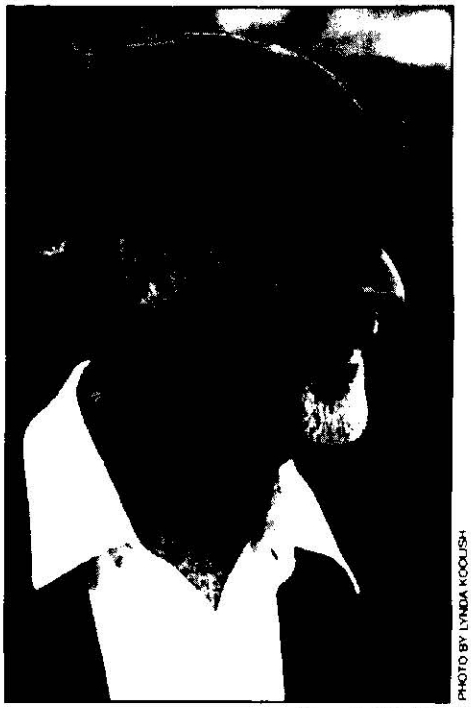
and "Frost at Midnight." The Conversation poems are characterized by an informality of diction and relaxation of syntax. Coleridge wrote in his *Biographia Literaria* that he had wanted these poems to be "replete with every excellence of thought, image, and passion—yet so worded, that the reader sees no reason either in the selection or the order of the words, why he might not have said the very same in an appropriate conversation." In his notes to Coleridge's *Selected Poems*, eminent Coleridge scholar Richard Holmes points out that the new, intimate form that Coleridge had created is intended to embody "'imaginary conversations'... held with particular people," and that the form is "halfway between the traditional 18th-century verse-letter or 'epistle,' and a more psychological form of Romantic meditation or autobiography."[7]

What is so striking about these poems is the way the speaker is able to establish a sense intimacy with the reader through the poem's deployment of rhetoric, while at the same time disguising the poem's blank-verse prosody with plain-style diction and minimal use of figural ornament. The reader is positioned in the role of the speaker's friend to whom the poem is addressed. The poem's rhetoric is precisely constructed so as to take the reader into the speaker's confidence:

> ...From thy spirit-breathing powers
> I ask not now, my friend! the aiding verse,
> Tedious to thee, and from thy anxious thought
> Of dissonant mood. In fancy (well I know)
> From business wandering far and local cares,
> Thou creepest round a dear-lov'd Sister's bed
> With noiseless step, and watchest the faint look,
> Soothing each pang with fond solicitude,
> And tenderest tones of medicinal love.
> I too a Sister *had*, an only Sister—
> She lov'd me dearly, and I doted on her!
> To her I pour'd forth all my puny sorrows
> (As a sick Patient in a Nurse's arms)
> And of the heart those hidden maladies
> That e'en from Friendship's eye will shrink asham'd.
>
> O! I have wak'd at midnight, and have wept,
> Because she was not!—Cheerily, dear Charles!
> Thou thy best friend shalt cherish many a year:
> Such warm presages feel I of high Hope.[8]

In "To a Friend," the reader is situated as the interlocutor, sitting alongside the poet's friend Charles Lamb, with whom the poet/speaker commiserates about their love for their sisters—Lamb's sister is ailing; the poet's sister has died. Coleridge, as the speaker, imagines his friend's suffering over the invalid sister he has been nursing. Such imaginings lead the speaker to recall his own affection for his dead sister. Through linking the speaker and interlocutor's feelings for their sisters, the poem establishes its rhetoric of empathy, implicating the reader as a participant in the construction of the poem's emotions. As the silent interlocutor, the reader's camaraderie is also implicit in the poem. The title itself "To a Friend," as well as the poem's familiar forms of address turn the reader into the speaker's familiar, an intimate to whom the speaker can confide: "Thus far my scanty brain hath built the rhyme / Elaborate and swelling: yet the heart / Not owns it."[9]

It is difficult without resorting to the antiseptic language of linguistics to describe how this positioning of the listener actually works. Linguists have noted that conversation is a cooperative form of discourse. According to Paul Werth: "Conversations occur in social situations, between participants bearing social relationships with each other, and having certain Conversational goals, which can be viewed in terms of social functions."[10] Also that "Conversational goals may also be viewed in terms of intended meaning. A Conversational contribution... is from this viewpoint a message having a co-operative function, i.e. it is an integral part of a jointly-entered contract to make sense."[11] Coleridge derived his Conversational poem form by modifying personal letters that he wrote to friends, sometimes incorporating verse. The relationship between poet and reader in such circumstances would operate much like that between letter writer and addressee. As in conversation, the writer of a personal letter and its recipient share a



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common body of personal knowledge and concerns—a common ground not widely available to others. A poem in the Conversational mode must make a similar claim to a common ground between poet/speaker and the intended reader in which other readers can cooperate in the production of meaning.

Typically, a narrative lyric in the Conversational mode would begin in a locale or circumstance familiar to both speaker and reader. As Steven Cramer writes in *The Atlantic Online*:

> "...a conversation poem typically begins in a precisely visualized, usually domestic location—the fire-lit nursery in 'Frost at Midnight,' where Coleridge watches over Hartley as he sleeps; or just outside the 'pretty cot' in 'The Eolian Harp,' where the Coleridges spent the first idyllic weeks of their ultimately dreadful marriage. Fortified by the sense impressions of its locale, the conversation poem sets off on a journey—into memory, introspection, metaphysical projection, and finally toward a vision of divinity—before circling back, the poet profoundly changed by that epiphany, to the spot from which it embarked"[12]

But this venturing out-epiphany-homecoming structure of the Conversation poem is not the only essential characteristic that distinguishes the present-day Conversational mode. There are indeed a host of modern examples from poets as diverse as Robert Frost, Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, Richard Wilbur, and Gerald Stern who have produced poems which intentionally or not revisit the Coleridgeian structure. What distinguishes the Conversational mode is not simply the way the poem thematizes its own narrative structure, but the manner in which the voice of the speaker is used to take the reader into the speaker's confidence. Taking a listener into one's confidence is what happens in conversation between friends. When the poem's speaker follows what linguists refer to as "the Conversational maxims," the reader, recognizing the pragmatic cues, will cooperate in co-producing the utterance's most apparent meaning.[13] If what a speaker says in a poem conforms to the Conversational maxim that what is being said is what the speaker believes to be true, and the statement is presented with accompanying evidence, then the reader/listener will accept the statement as being sincere. The production of sincerity has become central to poems written in the "Post-Confessional" mode. And the production of sincerity is integral to the construction of the lyric self.

Conversational Maxims

I. Maxims of Quantity: 1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange). 2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

II. Maxims of Quality: Supermaxim: Try to make your contribution one that is true. 1. Do not say what you believe to be false. 2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

III. Maxim of Relation: Be relevant.

IV. Maxims of Manner: Supermaxim: Be perspicuous. 1. Avoid obscurity/of expression. 2. Avoid ambiguity. 3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity). 4. Be orderly.

It is the Romantic invention of the lyric self that the impersonal prescriptions of an anti-Romantic Modernism—formulated by Yeats, Eliot, Pound, and Stevens—were designed to resist. And it is in reaction against the chilly impersonality of later formalist Modernism that Confessional poetry sprung, under the sway of the Freudian and Jungian psychology prevailing at mid-century. Such a change in poetic decorum ushered in a resurgence of the lyric self in all its theatricality, providing the grounds for the present-day post-Confessional era. "Poetic decorum," writes Billy Collins in his essay "My Grandfather's Tackle Box: The Limits of Memory-Driven Poetry" is "that cultural force which sets forth for any given age certain guidelines governing acceptable artistic expression."[14] He argues that poetic decorum would not have allowed for poets to make autobiographical material central to their poetry before the 1798 publication of *Lyrical Ballads* by Wordsworth and Coleridge. "Up until the end of the eighteenth century, poetic decorum would remind an author that he must keep himself subordinate to his subject matter... For a poet to write of his own life... would have been not only self-indulgent but of no value to an audience interested in its own edification, not the secrets of the poet's past."[15] However, writes Collins, despite our postmodern concessions to the unreliability of text and narrator, "readers of contemporary poetry still make deep emotional investments in the poets (not the 'speakers') whom they love to read...We retain a felt, post-romantic attachment to the author as a reliable self-expressive source—an equivalent to

the human voice we hear arising from print."[16]

Collins also questions whether "aesthetic distance" is still privileged. He writes: "What we really cherish is its opposite—what William Matthews has called 'aesthetic intimacy.'"[17] What brings readers to value such intimacy is the reader's participation in what I have previously called the rhetoric of empathy. The reader becomes invested in the speaker as a psychologically transparent and inviolable presence, a presence that for the reader represents a virtual self behind the text with whom he or she can imagine having a rapport. Modern readers have responded to the all-too-human claims of such textually constituted selves since the generation of Lowell. It seems that a Post-Confessional poetic decorum has arisen which legitimizes poems as autobiographic texts much more readily than as texts constructed as fictions.

Collins adds that such an autobiographical reading seems more inevitable once we become familiar with a larger body of work by poets "with whom we have formed long-standing alliances. The more we read of any one poet, the more clearly a human shape begins to emerge which we come to recognize as the human Berryman, the human Bishop. Eventually, we develop—sometimes against our wishes—a kind of interior soap opera, or call it a wax museum of poets—figural images we can visit and even commune with."[18]

A Confidence Game

Jon Anderson's poem, "In Autumn," originally published in 1974, follows the storyline of a Coleridgeian narrative—the journeying out, epiphany-finding, circling back scenario described by Cramer. Anderson's poem begins with the poet/speaker going out to gather firewood near his home. When the work is done, he climbs a hill from the top of which he can look down on his house and the river valley below:

> ...The river
> Below was a thick, dark line.
> My house was quaint
> I sat, not thoughtful,
> Lost in the body awhile.[19]

He then returns home, taking the "back way, winding / through stands of cedar and pine."[20] On this winding journey home, the poet/speaker may be seen as entering Dante's woods—the *selva oscura*—and having entered becoming reflective.

> I can tell you where I live.
> My grief is that I bear no grief
> & so I bear myself. I know I live apart.
> But have had long evenings of conversation,
> The faces of which betrayed
> No separation from a place or time. Now,
> In the middle of my life,
> A woman of delicate bearing gives me
> Her hand, & friends
> Are so enclosed within my reasoning
> I am occasionally them.[21]

When poet/speaker says his grief is that he bears no grief "& so I bear myself," the implicit question is bear (bare) himself to whom? The answer would seem to implicate the reader, the confidant whose presence is constellated by the poem's empathic rhetoric. Would it not be the reader-as-confidant with whom the speaker has had "long evenings of conversation"? In that context "I know I live apart" can be read as either that the speaker lives at a remove from others in a solitude that encourages the expression of his inwardness. Or that he lives (a)part—plays a role, creates a lyric self within the text that fulfills the transaction with the reader required to produce the poem's meaning.

The second reading would seem to be reinforced by the lines, "& friends/ Are so enclosed within my reasoning/ I am occasionally them."[22] By locating friends as "enclosed within my reasoning," the poet/speaker suggests that such friends remain an intimate presence, absent or not. Indeed, would not the friends enclosed within the speaker's reasoning also implicate the presence of the reader, who like those absent friends has been taken into the speaker's confidence? By locating the reader as both interlocutor and friend, the poem generates its rhetoric of empathy. However, in actuality the poet/speaker is unlikely to be a friend, or even an acquaintance (unless the reader knows the actual Jon Anderson). Or perhaps is not an actual person at all, but a fictional figure. Thus, the poem could be said to construct a *confidence game*, a fiction in which the speaker is positioned rhetorically to promote the reader's investment in an actual person, the poet behind the poem, who the reader constructs, based upon whom he takes the speaker to be.

"I Would Like To Make You Believe In Me"

That the speaker in a Conversation poem is taken to be autobiographic is determined in large part by the reader's perception of the speaker's reliability, by the degree of aesthetic intimacy the speaker allows, and how closely the speaker's discourse conforms to the Conversational maxims. Given our habit of reading the "I" in a conversational lyric as an "authentic" autobiographical speaker, the Conversational conventions themselves have become ripe to be thematized and subverted. In Stephen Dunn's "Biography in the First Person," the post-Confessional decorum is used against itself. The poem begins:

> This is not the way I am.
> Really, I am much taller in person,
> the hairline I conceal reaches back
> to my grandfather, and the shyness my wife
> will not believe in has always been why
> I was bold on first dates.[23]

By raising an expectation, as the title does, that the "I" represents an authentic person—an autobiographic speaker—the Post-Confessional habits of reading are usually reinforced. But habits of reading can be disrupted if a Conversational maxim is knowingly violated. Dunn's poem appears to deliberately violate the maxim of not speaking what is known to be false. Yet, for the poem to achieve its ironic effect, the reader must detect, from the very opening lines, that the speaker is not telling the truth. As the ironies multiply, the speaker's veracity is increasingly undermined. Because of the speaker's unreliability, the reader cannot determine the transparency of the speaker's

utterance, or whether the utterance further obfuscates the speaker's meaning:

> I am somewhat older than you can tell.
> The early deaths have decomposed
> behind my eyes, leaving lines apparently caused
> by smiling. My voice still reflects the time
> I believed in prayer as a way of getting
> what I wanted. I am none of my clothes.[24]

Because the speaker's utterance cannot be read as transparent, the reader cannot feel confident of the lyric self's sincerity. Thus, the reader cannot determine the poem's degree of fidelity to the speaker's authentic experience. Or whether the speaker is an authentic person at all. The poem not only fails to generate aesthetic intimacy but also ironizes such intimacy's production. Although this poem participates in the conventions of the Conversational mode, the speaker is knowingly playing the confidence game. And tells us so. He tells us that he disguises rather than reveals himself; the speaker is "none of his clothes." And although the speaker self-consciously points to the poem's Conversational strategies, the speaker's claims appear to be little more than a tease. Given the speaker's unreliability, even his most seemingly transparent statement becomes ironized. By ironizing what otherwise might be read as revelatory, Dunn's poem exposes and interrogates its own Conversational strategies: "My poems are approximately true. / The games I play and how I play them / are the arrows you should follow."[25] One of the arrows the reader is instructed to follow warns: "...Be careful: / I would like to make you believe in me."[26]

Constructing the Genuine

Stephen Dunn in his essay "the poet as fictionist," argues that, "we need to enlarge our sense of what can constitute the personal so that it includes the kindred and alien experiences of our fellow humans."[27] And that "Poet/fictionists know that their true love is the poem—that experience made of words—not the experience behind it...This may mean that...we're primarily interested in phrasing and pacing not to mention the exploration of the inherent larger subject... which we must remember is not peculiar to ourselves."[28] To produce such poems, Dunn recommends poets "should feel free to employ whatever we need in order to approximate our sense of the real, which [Marianne] Moore would call 'the genuine.'"[29] Yet Dunn's position appears to be consistent with the Post-Confessional poetic decorum, that even if the poem does not contain an exact replica of experience, it should contain a close "approximation." Despite Dunn's desire for poetry not to be determined by what is autobiographically authentic, his argument still privileges the discourse of sincerity. His "fictionist's credo" echoes Grice's Conversational Maxims.

Yet, by suggesting that a poem's subject encompass what is outside the poet's actual experience, Dunn argues for stretching the limits of the Post-Confessional poetic decorum—whose conventions are showing signs of exhaustion. Indeed, autobiographic poetry recently has become less dominant within the poetic mainstream, having been the subject of nearly three decades of almost continuous critique from both the postmodernist avant-garde and the neo-formalists for producing a poetry that has become increasingly derivative and banal.

In what manner have some poems in the Conversational mode attempted to interrogate the discourse of sincerity, to disentangle the lyric self from the actuality of prior experience and thus explore "the inherent larger subject," to use Dunn's phrase, "not peculiar to ourselves"?[30] Linda Gregg's "Asking for Directions"[31] suggests the larger subject in its deployment of declarative language in an effort to objectify lyric subjectivity, but only partially succeeds in doing so. Jorie Graham's "Region of Unlikeness"[32] moves further in the direction of the larger subject, utilizing a more radical strategy of narrative disruption to expose the lyric self as a rhetorical construct, and suggesting that language can be generative of our sense of the real.

Gregg's poem presents the testimony of an authorial female speaker addressing a "you," her presumably married lover whom she is accompanying to Chicago from Manhattan by train as he returns home to his family. The poem documents the last hours the lovers spend together, apparently having agreed to end their affair prior to the start of the poem. The "you" is situated as a silent interlocutor to whom the speaker recounts events in which he is both a participant and in the recounting a spectator—a position shared by the reader. As is characteristic of poems in the Conversational mode, the "I" and "you" possess a common body of personal knowledge and concerns, a common ground not widely available to others, yet to which the reader is privy. Although theatrically dramatized, the "I" in the poem reports the end of the affair in a narrative seemingly unenhanced by rhetoric or figurative ornament.

The poem opens in the conditional tense: "We could have been mistaken for a married couple / riding the train from Manhattan to Chicago / the last time we were together."[33] The use of the conditional positions the reader as a spectator who might casually assume, observing the couple, that they were married. The couple is represented behaving in a manner that signifies intimacy, "I slept across your / chest and stomach without asking permission."[34] However, the conditional also generates the line's verbal irony—the couple's marital status is deliberately misidentified. The misreading of the couple as married is in fact the product of the speaker's subjectivity, not the spectator's gaze. The reader is quickly led to understand the couple's relationship is adulterous by the poem's deployment of Conversational conventions that take the reader/spectator into the speaker's confidence. If the reader presumes the speaker's language to be transparent, according to the Conversational Maxims, the speaker's utterance will be judged to be true. The reader's Post-Confessional habits of reading also reinforce the belief that the speaker's narrative is genuine, objectifying the retelling of her difficult personal situation.

But the conditional tense also compels the reader to grapple with the language, particularly the degree to which an utterance such as "We could have been mistaken for..." can be read as knowingly being true or false. On what grounds can the reader determine the speaker's reliability? As readers we do not actually know the speaker. Nor are we situated as firsthand witnesses to the events the poem dramatizes, only to the speaker's re-telling of them. As readers we find

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ourselves in "the in-between places, the world / with its back turned to us,"[35] reliant upon the language through which the speaker narrates the scenes of the lovers parting. The speaker's self-consciousness, which the Conversational mode foregrounds, emphasizes that in addition to the lovers' drama what is also being staged by the poem is the speaker's subjectivity—the speaker's desire to possess her beloved, to not let him go. So is the speaker's claim plausible that she and her lover could have been mistaken for a married couple? What distinguishes a married couple from any other? The claim's purpose would seem less a matter of representing a demonstrable truth than the speaker's quixotic version of it. The speaker's reliability, therefore, is contingent upon the reader recognizing the speaker's desire as implicit within the poem, which also exposes the poem's reliance on Conversational conventions—on its playing the confidence game.

By reading the narrative evidence as reliable, the reader determines the speaker's utterance, although saturated by her subjectivity, her desire, is genuine:

> There was
> a smell to the sheepskin lining of your new
> Chinese vest that I didn't recognize. I felt
> it deliberately...
> ...In the station
> you took your things and handed me the vest,
> then left as we had planned. So you would have
> ten minutes to meet your family and leave.
> I stood by the seat dazed by exhaustion
> and the absoluteness of the end, so still I was
> aware of myself breathing. I put on the vest
> and my coat, got my bag and, turning, saw you
> through the dirty window standing outside looking
> up at me.[36]

Nonetheless, the line "I felt it deliberately," which the speaker interjects after smelling the lining of her lover's vest, theatricalizes the loss that the poem memorializes. Such deliberately heightened self-consciousness suffuses the final moments between the lovers, seeing each other a last time through the dirty train window, leading to the speaker's assertion "That moment is what I will tell of as proof / that you loved me permanently."[37] Here is another line whose truth would seem not wholly demonstrable.

How can the moment when "We looked at each other without any / expression at all"[38] be proposed as plausible proof of love? Perhaps by putting on the vest her lover handed her, enclosing herself within an artifact of his presence, the speaker offers evidence of his love's continuance. Or perhaps the claim constitutes another instance of verbal irony, giving voice to the speaker's yearning, even false hope—in which case she knowingly speaks falsely, but the reader is in on the game. Or perhaps because the poem participates in Romantic and lyric conventions, the speaker's claim can be read as an epiphany preserved within the eternal moment of the lyric, fixed in language like Wordsworth's "spots of time." I would argue that to some extent all three readings are available. However, in Gregg's poem, the text—constructed to suppress its own rhetoric—needs the reader as an accomplice to produce that sense of the genuine Marianne Moore speaks of. The experience of authenticity (or semblance to the real) results from the reader decoding the language according to Post-Confessional habits of reading, attributing to the speaker elements peculiar to the poet's autobiography and not the inherent larger subject which, as in the case of "Asking for Directions," limits the poem to being read within the discourse of sincerity.

The Dream of Authenticity

Jorie Graham's "Region of Unlikeness" begins in the second person, a "you" read as the mirrored "I" of the authorial speaker—a common practice within the post-Confessional poetic decorum. The poem's narrative, however, self-consciously foregrounds its own conventions, interrogating the subjectivity that the deployment of the second person speaker exposes:

> You wake up and you don't know who it is there breathing
> beside you (the world is a different place from what it
> seems)
> and then you do.
> The window is open, it is raining, then it has just
> ceased. What is the use of poetry, friend?
> And you, are you one of those girls?[39]

The poem describes an incident the authorial "you" is remembering when as a thirteen-year-old girl she woke up in a man's room in Rome unsure of where she was and who she was with. The incident is staged theatrically, but the language is not as transparent as in Gregg's poem. "What is the use of poetry, friend?"—a self-reflexive question seemingly directed to the poet's interlocutor—suggests that this memory may be as much the product of the speaker's narration as it is authentic or mimetic experience. The line can be read either as a sigh of resignation or a questioning of the grounds on which the poem is written. Read through the Conversational conventions, the poem asks the reader as the speaker's interlocutor and confidant to consider what the purpose of poetry is, a question which becomes thematized through the remainder of the poem.

Graham's authorial speaker narrates the poem from the position of watching herself write the poem. Within the meta-narration she constructs the trope of being asleep for the un-self-reflective process of narration. In the narrative process reader and poet conspire, mesmerized by the post-Confessional lyric conventions of memory-driven poetry, to insist upon the poem's textual representation of experience be allowed to stand unquestioned for "the real." The authorial narrator in Graham's poem implores herself and her companion (and by extension the reader) "Don't wake up. Keep this all in black and white."[40] And later: "You wake up from what? Have you been there? / What is this loop called *being* beating against the ends / of things?"[41] We can read the trope manifested in Graham's meta-narrative as positing a Platonic argument which questions the second-person narrative's representation of memory in language—suggested by a loop of black and white film—and deems it to be untrustworthy. "Have you

been there?" It is the process of composition that constructs the narrative and controls how the story will be recalled: "Do you want her to go home now? do you want her late for school? / Here is her empty room, // a trill of light on the white bedspread."[42]

The authorial voice writing the poem asks, "If I am responsible, it is for what?"[43] The question is quite obviously rhetorical. Given our reliance as readers upon Conversational conventions, we must determine whether such an utterance and its supporting evidence should be taken as false or true. Although, we understand that the speaker may have invented the details used to mesmerize us into believing the authenticity of the memory-driven narrative, we also understand that the speaker knows she is using invention to drive the process of composition:

> If I am responsible, it is for what? the field at the
> end? the woman weeping in the row of colors? the exact
> shades of color? the actions of the night before?
> Is there a way to move through which makes it hard
> enough—thorny, re-
>
> membered? Push. Push through with this girl
> recalled down to the last bit of cartilage [44]

What Graham's speaker grapples with is that memory, because it is a product of language, is inseparable from the process of the poem's composition, which in fact determines it. Because the speaker confides to us as readers her struggle with these difficult issues, we read such lines as belonging to the discourse of sincerity.

Graham further theatricalizes the writing process, switching the narrative frame to "Twenty years later"[45] near Tie Siding, Wyoming, where the speaker watches butterflies hatching. This second narrative serves not only as the poem's lyric epiphany but also as a trope for the meta-narrative of composing in language: "... the new hatchlings // everywhere—they're drying in the grasses / —they lift their wings up / into the // groundwind—so many— / I kick them gently to make room—clusters lift with each step."[46] Here the poem provides the one detail that can most readily be read autobiographically as peculiar to the poet: the fact that Graham lived in Tie Siding. The Conversational conventions allow us to seize that detail, using it to read the hatching butterflies as a self-reflexive trope. The butterflies are becoming visible everywhere just as the language does within the poem, which the poet understands she must take responsibility for in the process of writing the narrative that is pulling her memory back to Rome. At the end of the poem when the earlier memory reasserts itself what also becomes visible—visible even by means of the line breaks which call attention to the materiality of the language—is the allegorization of the narrative: "and below the women leaning, calling the price out handling / each fruit, shaking the dirt off."[47] The price of waking up from the dream of the lyric self's mimetic authenticity is the acceptance of memory as being a construct of language. Hence, the speaker's skepticism toward language as the medium of her remembrance: "Oh wake up, wake / up, something moving through the air now, something in the ground / that/ waits."[48]

Disrupting Sincerity

Billy Collins is another poet who, often working within the Conversational mode, finds ways to make the reader conscious of the artifice behind the construction of lyric self. His nuanced critique of what he calls "memory-driven poetry" is one of the pleasures that for a careful reader lies beneath the comedic wit and the deceptive, seemingly artless surface of a number of Collins's poems. In "Osso Buco," Collins constructs a speaker who takes pleasure in his gluttony. Collins's poem begins at the speaker's dinner table, goes on an inward journey as the speaker imagines places of deprivation and hunger, and then returns to the speaker's bedroom at the end of the night, where falling asleep beside his companionable wife the speaker has the poem's obligatory epiphany. "Osso Buco" not only recapitulates the structure of the Conversation poem but also questions the comforts readers receive from the conventions of the Conversational mode. The speaker tells us:

> I am swaying now in the hour after dinner,
> a citizen tilted back on his chair,
> a creature with a full stomach—
> something you don't hear much about in poetry,
> that sanctuary of hunger and deprivation.
> You know: the driving rain, the boots by the door,
> small birds searching for berries in winter.
>
> But tonight, the Lion of contentment
> has placed a warm, heavy paw on my chest,
> and I can only close my eyes and listen
> to the drums of woe throbbing in the distance.[49]

The speaker's hyperbolic description of contentment alerts the reader that the speaker's language is potentially untrue. The description of poetry, implicating the reader/interlocutor with the all encompassing "you know," similarly underscores the language's ironic hyperbole: "the driving rain, the boots by the door, / small birds searching for berries in winter." The irony is what drains away authority from the poem's representation of the genuine. Where is the genuine to be found amid this language mottled with metaphor? It is the poem's playful invention, rather than its fidelity to the genuine, that is privileged.

> I love the sound of the bone against the plate
> and the fortress-like look of it
> lying before me in the moat of risotto,
> the meat soft as the leg of an angel
> who has lived a purely airborne existence.
> And best of all, the secret marrow,
> the invaded privacy of the animal
> prized out with a knife and swallowed down
> with cold, exhilarating wine.[50]

I would also assert that the poem's figuration in this first stanza, the act of eating Osso Buco, thematizes the conventions of the Conversational mode; the object of the reader's craving being the speaker's "invaded privacy," "the secret marrow" which is "prized out" with the knife of the poem. Permission to invade the speaker's privacy is a condition of the discourse of sincerity. Therein lies the reader's investment in the speaker's actuality as the poet's human presence.

Collins's poem deliberately disrupts the reader's investment in the actuality of the speaker by violating the Conversational maxim that one should not

speak falsely. Though it cannot be known how much Collins's speaker falsifies, that he exaggerates when referring to poetry as "that sanctuary of hunger and deprivation" there is little doubt, aiming a barb at the Post-Confessional poetic decorum ushered in by Lowell that has depended on the author's self-dramatization and encouraged the reader to indulge in a form of psychological rubber-necking. Collins's hyperbole is read as satiric, one of the poem's trademark virtues, if the work is to succeed. The reader, positioned by the "you know" to be a co-conspirator in the production of the poem's ironic and comedic meaning.

Collins's use of such rhetorical artifice subverts the poem's authenticity as readers have come to expect it, following conventions of the Post-Confessional poetic decorum. The question of the poem representing Billy Collins's authentic lived-experience at the dinner table is of little consequence. Yet the reader remains positioned within the structure of the poem's narrative to posit the speaker as being a representation of the poet who has taken us into his confidence. The poem does not resolve the matter of the speaker's authenticity with its ending epiphany:

> In a while, one of us will go up to bed
> and the other one will follow.
> Then we will slip below the surface of the night
> into miles of water, drifting down and down
> to the dark, soundless bottom
> until the weight of dreams pull us lower still,
> below the shale and layered rock,
> below the strata of hunger and pleasure,
> into the broken bones of the earth itself,
> into the marrow of the only place we know.[51]

In the narrative, the "us" is presented as the speaker and his wife. However, read according to the conventions of the Conversational mode, the "us" can represent the speaker and reader/interlocutor, who have embarked on a journey together through the uncertainties of the poem's discourse, and who have been absorbed into the indeterminacy that lies inside the production of meaning, "The marrow of the only place we know." Such a reading best accounts for the poem's tone of relaxed yet uneasy chumminess, the reader left unsure whether the proverbial rug has or has not been pulled out from under us.

Clearly, conventions of the Conversational mode inherited from Coleridge suit very well the Post-Confessional poetic decorum of our era. One of those purposes, borrowed from the earlier flowering of letter writing in the 18th century, is to engender the reader's broad admiration for the letter's author. Though the identity of Billy Colllins's speaker may be less autobiographically determined than the speaker in Jon Anderson's, Linda Gregg's, or Jorie Graham's poems, the promotion of the reader's admiration for an authorial agent who can use language to produce such gluttonous pleasures remains central to Collins's poetic strategy. In considering such recent examples of poems in the Conversational mode, it should be useful to remember Stephen Dunn's cautionary lines: "Be careful / I would like to make you believe in me." Such a disclaimer could be applied to any poem whose artifice invites aesthetic intimacy, and which seeks to take the reader into its confidence. AWP

Notes

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4. Jed Rasula, *The American Poetry Wax Museum*, (Urbana, IL: National Conference of Teachers of English, 1995), 416.

5. Stephen Dunn, *Walking Light*, (Rochester, New York: BOA, 2001), 109.

6. Ibid., 110.

7. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Selected Poems*, ed. Richard Holmes, (New York: Penguin, 1990).

8. Ibid., 35.

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12. Steven Cramer, "The Lime-Tree Bower My Prison," *The Atlantic Online*, Poetry Pages, September 27, 2000, <www.theatlantic.com/unbound/poetry/soundings/coleridge.htm>.

13. Richard Hanchet, Grice's "'Implicatur' and Literary Interpretation: Background and Preface," (Unpublished paper, 1978), <http://mh.cla.umn.edu/grice.html>. H.P. Grice in 1967 presented his theories on "Logic and Conversation" in a series of William James lectures delivered at Harvard.

14. Billy Collins, "My Grandfather's Tackle Box: the Limits of Memory-Driven Poetry," in *After Confession*, ed. Kate Sontag and David Graham, (St. Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2001), 82.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., 89.

17. Ibid., 90.

18. Ibid., 91.

19. Jon Anderson, *The Milky Way: Poems 1967-1982*, (New York: Ecco Press, 1983), 141.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Stephen Dunn, *New and Selected Poems 1974-1994*, (New York: Norton, 1994), 41.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. Dunn, *Walking Light*, 188.

28. Ibid., 189–90.

29. Ibid., 191.

30. Ibid., 189–90.

31. Linda Gregg, *Chosen by the Lion*, (St. Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf Press), 1994, 16–17.

32. Jorie Graham, "Region of Unlikeness," in *Dream of the Unified Field: Selected Poems 1974–1994*, (New York: Ecco Press, 1995), 115–118.

33. Gregg, 16.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid., 17.

38. Ibid., 16–17.

39. Graham, 115.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid, 116.

43. Ibid., 117.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid., 117–118.

48. Ibid., 118.

49. Billy Collins, *Sailing Alone Around the Room*, (New York: Random House, 2001), 49.

50. Ibid.

51. Ibid., 50.